

Point-Counterpoint

Should physicians support the medical use of marijuana?

William S Eidelman

2901 Wilshire Blvd, Ste
311
Santa Monica, CA
90403

naturaldoctor@earthlink.net

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None declared

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Yes: It can be effective when all else fails

As a physician, I have had many hundreds of ill patients—with diseases such as cancer, arthritis, multiple sclerosis, epilepsy, and depression—tell me that marijuana gave them immense relief without any disturbing side effects. It is hard for me to doubt marijuana's clinical effectiveness.

The Compassionate Use Act of 1996 legalized the medical use of marijuana in California. Since then, many patients have reported to me that marijuana is the only thing that helps them achieve symptom relief. In some cases, patients report that marijuana enhances the effects of prescription drugs, which might have been helping, but not enough. In other cases, marijuana, they say, removes the side effects of necessary drugs, particularly those used to treat cancer and AIDS.

Marijuana has been used as a medicine across the globe for thousands of years. In the United States, it was in the US Pharmacopeia until its removal in 1941. Legal challenges to the prohibition of medical marijuana have led to many government investigations. These have confirmed the value and safety of marijuana as a medicine.

For example, on September 6, 1988, the Drug Enforcement Administration's chief administrative law judge, Francis L Young, after a long series of hearings, ruled:

Marijuana, in its natural form, is one of the safest therapeutically active substances known. The evidence in this record clearly shows that marijuana has been accepted as capable of relieving the distress of great numbers of very ill people, and doing so with safety under medical supervision. It would be unreasonable, arbitrary, and capricious for DEA to continue to stand between those sufferers and the benefits of this substance in light of the evidence in this record.¹

The Institute of Medicine's 1999 report, on the request of the US Congress, was also favorable toward the medical use of marijuana.² It confirmed that marijuana was safe and beneficial in a wide range of conditions.

A recent study at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore examined the effects of marijuana on cognition in 1,318 participants during a 15-year period.³ Researchers reported "no significant differences in cognitive decline between heavy users, light users, and nonusers of cannabis." They concluded, "These results . . . seem to provide strong evidence of the absence of a long-term residual effect of cannabis use on cognition."^{3(p798)}

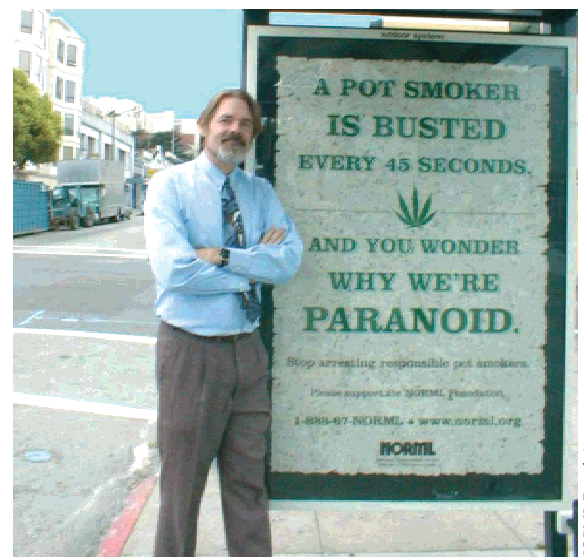
Although recent research has suggested that the long-

term use of marijuana might be associated with lung cancer, no study has ever proved unequivocally a causal link. John P Morgan of City University of New York Medical School testified to Congress that "We are some 30 to 40 years into this marijuana epidemic and still have not seen evidence of pulmonary cancer in marijuana smokers" (D Bueckert, "Marijuana Doesn't Cause Lung Cancer, Says Medical Researcher," *Canadian Press*, June 11, 2001 [www.canoe.ca/Health0106/12_marijuana-ap.html]). He also said that there was no link between marijuana use and emphysema or birth defects.

The benefits of the use of marijuana far outweigh the risks. Physicians should take the advice of the editorialist in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, who said, "Some physicians will have the courage to challenge the continued proscription of marijuana for the sick."⁴ In so doing, doctors will not just be showing courage, they will also be showing compassion for their ill patients.

References

- 1 US Dept of Justice, Drug Enforcement Agency. *In the Matter of Marijuana Rescheduling Petition*. Docket 86-22. September 6, 1988, p 68.
- 2 Joy JE, Watson SJ Jr, Benson JA Jr, for the Division of Neuroscience and Behavioral Research, Institute of Medicine. *Marijuana and Medicine: Assessing the Science Base*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press; 1999.
- 3 Lyketsos CG, Garrett E, Liang KY, Anthony JC. Cannabis use and cognitive decline in persons under 65 years of age. *Am J Epidemiol* 1999;149:794-800.
- 4 Kassirer JP. Federal foolishness and marijuana [editorial]. *N Engl J Med* 1997;336:366-367.



Supporters of responsible cannabis use campaign to ensure its continued availability